

A FRESH LOOK AT SUMMER CAMP MINISTRY

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There have been many studies as to why youth and young adults are leaving the church; however, there seems to be little to no research on the effects of traditional evangelism within this demographic. Many ministries in the church serve these groups, but as of yet, there is nothing established in terms of public evangelism designed specifically for them. Thus, it seems as though traditional adult public evangelism is the main method by which the church has attempted to reach into the community and grow the kingdom of God for all ages.

In his book *Everlasting Gospel, Ever-Changing World*, Jon Paulien says that, “People need to be addressed in a language with which they are familiar. The reason that the Adventist message is spreading like wildfire in places like New Guinea, the Philippines, Kenya, and parts of the Caribbean is that Adventism as we normally express it is exactly what those people are looking for. But in other places, the same message seems out of context. God meets people where they are, and He invites us to follow His example and do the same”¹. He goes on to say that, “Meeting people where they are means that analyzing the audience is the first step in reaching out to the secular mainstream, whether modern or postmodern. We need to listen before we talk. People have the power to tune out the gospel. If we fail to meet them where they are, the message will not reach them even if it is staring them in the face. We need to spend time discovering the felt needs of individuals and groups before the gospel can be presented to them in power”².

It is easy to make assumptions as to why traditional adult public evangelism isn’t working with youth and young adults, but in order to have a more accurate perspective we asked those who are trying to be reached. A group of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) young adults between the ages of 25 and 30 were asked what they thought about how the church conducts evangelism, and by-and-large their sentiment is that traditional evangelism lacks intentionality, high-quality programming, authentic community, and practical life applicability.

One interviewee, Danika Ouzounian said, “Evangelism fails because it’s not done well. I want excellence in everything I do and am a part of. I often feel that the church settles for mediocrity and does not strive for excellence. I want a program that is intentional”. In addition, she said that, “Evangelism excels when it makes the young adult feel a part of the ministry. You want to be spiritually inspired and feel like a contributing part of the community”.

Another young adult, Nic Reichert, stated, “ ‘Evangelism’ in the traditional sense doesn’t appeal to our age demographic. That term is associated with isolated events where someone shows up, preaches, and then leaves. Our age demographic wants more of a relationship. To be talked with and not ‘evangelized’ to. I would like to feel like I am part of a community that actively does things

and makes a difference, as opposed to showing up to a place or meeting and that's it. This generation, generally, likes action and service in my experience".

Finally, Zachary Surovec, the young adult chaplain at Thunderbird Adventist Academy, shared, "I think there is something to be said about intentional programming. I enjoy going to something that is ran well. It makes me feel that people are intentionally trying to connect with me and it communicates that I'm important to them so maybe they should be important to me. If that's the case, I'm always more likely to take time out of my schedule to listen to them. I want to believe that by having gone to this event I'll will be a better person because of it. There's so much that fights for my attention and I want to know that the time I'm giving up to be there will be worth my time and not a waste of it".

Summer Camp Participation as Evangelism Model

Youth and young adult evangelism, at least in the traditional sense, seems to be somewhat ineffective within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, there is a ministry of the church that seems to be reaching our youth and young adults, both in the church and those from the outside. This ministry is summer camp. Every summer, our camps are full of youth and young adults who are eager to be at a place where God is alive and present. Thousands of decisions are made each summer, including campers and staff alike who sign up for Bible study lessons, baptism and who commit or re-commit their lives to Christ. Campers often make comments to the tune of, "Camp is the best place in the world" or "I wish I could stay here forever." However, these types of comments are not just isolated to campers, traditionally thought of as being the ones ministered to. They also regularly come from the staff.

Jared Siok, a young adult and long-time camp staff member, said, "Camp, when I look back on it, feels like a sliver of what Heaven is like, in all honesty. After my experience at camp, I have a prayer that every day that I live, every day that I can be alive, it can be like a day at Camp Waianae³, where everyone was just loving on each other—connected harmoniously in peace and serenity. Working at Camp Waianae has been a wonderful experience. It's been so rewarding for me. Being able to serve, being able to step out of my own self and into the lives of these kids at this camp, it's impacted me, I believe, for the rest of my life. It's something that I carry with me every single day knowing that I'm not just Jared, living for myself, but that I can be an influence on others. I love working with kids. I love youth ministry".

Simply put, summer camp is a place where youth and young adults are grounded in their relationship with God and a place where they long to be. They take these experiences with them through life and hold onto them hoping to find something in the church that is as meaningful and fulfilling as their experience over the summer. In the next few sections we share some ideas on how to utilize summer camp for effective youth and young adult evangelism, based on recent experiences at Camp Waianae.

Importance of Staff Mentorship

Camp Waianae piloted a staff mentorship program that had intentionality, excellent programing, provided authentic community, and possessed practical life application. Over the summer, our staff pastor focused on three main areas dealing with their identity, purpose and worth, which helped to ground them

in their identity as sons and daughters of God. On the last day of camp, these young adults had grown so much in their walk with God that ten of the staff were baptized (30% of the total camp staff). This mentorship also impacted the campers as well, which led to many baptisms and requests for bible studies. These types of experiences are not isolated to just one camp. They happen all across North America.

Key Elements for Successful Summer Camp Ministry

An important question worth asking is: What makes summer camp have such a positive impact in the lives of youth and young adults? Here are a few key ingredients that deserve a closer look:

- Camp is a place that is built around **friendship**: camper to camper, camper to staff, staff to staff, staff to supervisor and God to all.
- Camp is a place with **fun and engaging activities**. These activities provide a safe, non-threatening environment for relationships to be formed naturally between campers and staff.
- Camp is a **safe place**. It seeks to provide physical, emotional and spiritual safety.
- Camp was and is a concept **created specifically for youth and young adults**. It's a place where they can be fully themselves; they are embraced and encouraged for who they are.
- Camp is a place where **everyone has opportunities to serve** and thus feel needed and valued.
- Camp is a place where **intentional mentorship** takes place on all levels and fosters an environment that empowers young adults to lead.
- Camp has a **defined goal** with a plan in place to achieve it. It takes months of planning and investment, and everyone is part of the planning process.
- Camp has a **message of hope**. It tells people there is a God who loves them, cares about them and has a plan for their life.
- Camp sessions end with **an invitation for everyone to accept Jesus** as their personal Lord and Savior. Everyone is encouraged to make a new commitment or strengthen one they have already made.
- Camp challenges participants **to live a life of service**. Campers and staff are invited to share what they have experienced and to commit their lives to service.

When these key ingredients are put together, they make a profound impact on the lives of our youth and young adults. The summer camp environment has all three areas that many young adults desire: authentic community, intentional and excellent programing, and practical life applicability. What would it look like if we applied these same key elements to evangelism in our churches?

Application of Summer Camp Principles for Yearlong Youth Ministry

Looking at the summer camp model, the Youth Department of the Hawaii Conference resolved to apply the same principles to a yearlong evangelistic effort. Over \$60,000 dollars was acquired and a plan was put in place. A group of young adults would assist in putting on a nine-day series at eight different churches throughout the year. A 'Week of Prayer' would take place in the mornings at the local elementary school(s) followed by a youth and young adult meeting in the evening. The afternoons were designed to allow for day excursions and fellowship. Everyone on the team was assigned a responsibility and was part of the entire planning process.

The series message was simple and clear: God Loves You. It covered topics such as identity, purpose, worth, how to be free from sin, living in the Spirit and walking by faith, forgiveness, righteousness and destiny. Programming was contemporary, modest, and would not exceed an hour each night. It targeted those between the ages of 14 and 35, although it was open to all. Refreshments or a light meal were provided each night to create and foster a relaxed environment in which to discuss the message that had just been heard. At the close of each series, a decision card was shared where people could make a commitment to Christ along with a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the evangelistic effort. What took place far exceeded our expectations:

- All age groups attended and were engaged (6–80+ yr. olds).
- The churches were full all week long.
- Mentorship took place between leadership and young adults (life and spirituality) and teamwork was found to be essential.
- Participants experienced revival in all age categories.
- Young adults started inviting their friends to join the ministry team.
- Churches saw their youth involved in service with a clear sense of ownership.
- Due to the success of this initiative, other conferences and churches have decided to fund future meetings.

When asked how they felt in relation to the Love Reality Tour (LRT), its effectiveness and what it meant to be a part of the leadership team, young adults responded in a variety of ways. Gabriel Riojas said, "I believe LRT was successful because its message of confident gospel living is steeped in scripture. There was clarity in explaining portions of scripture by giving examples, having Q&As, telling personal testimonies, and having conversations after the message. Also, LRT is very intentional in creating a unique program experience through videos, worship music, aesthetics (lights, presentation, stage), and program layout. There are greeters that help people feel open and comfortable which is important for those who receive the message. Afterwards, the refreshments help create a sweet environment for active dialogue and authentic fellowship to occur. Finally, there is a lot of intentionality within the team. From the worship leaders to the greeters, there is deep spiritual bonding, prayer, honesty, and fun fellowship that helps LRT have a lasting experience on local church communities".

Additionally, Mikey Archibeque noted that, “People felt comfortable actually worshipping in the way they liked. People were comfortable singing with their spirit as well as their voices. They learned songs that they had never heard and they began to embody the songs as much as the messages so that by the end, LRT was roaring in worship. I’ve never seen as many people come during the middle of the week as with these meetings. More people definitely came on the weekends, but most of the churches were consistent the whole week, and by the end they all wanted more. They saw that they were just starting to see God’s goodness and that they were taking their first steps into the discovery of it all. It also brought the churches in the Conference closer together. There seemed to be a commonality among the churches we went to and I think with the Conference sending such a high quality event to churches that don’t often get this kind of communicator, with a great team of professionals, it really helped get Conference buy-in from the churches and their members and vice versa. It helped heal the community of Hawaii”.

When asked what they thought was unique about LRT, the leadership continued to share what they thought made the program so powerful and effective. JR Bonilla said, “Part of what makes LRT great is that it seeks to involve young people, yet while young people are the target, it involves and appeals to all generations resulting in unifying the local church from old to young with the solid message of love from the Bible. I believe younger and elder people value from inter-generational experiences and LRT is one that fosters a welcoming environment for both to come together. [It] was [also] successful in sharing the gospel message from the Bible in a way that is normally ignored or forgotten by many. For myself, it has been liberating to hear the message of love and grace, which drives and motivates a deeper & richer time in scripture and service to others”.

While these comments came from just a sampling of the young adults who helped run the series, similar sentiments were shared by almost all who organized and attended the events.

The Survey

As mentioned previously, all participants were given a survey at the conclusion of the series. Below is a table noting the ages of the respondents and the results of the questions that were answered with a yes/no response.

| Survey Results |
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| 9% were between the ages of 6-12 |
| 12% were between the ages 13-18 |
| 23% were between the ages 19-35 |
| 22% were between the ages 36-50 |
| 34% were over the age of 50 |
| 8 meetings were held; 545 registered, with 267 completed surveys |

1. **Was LRT beneficial to your spiritual life?** 99.2 % answered “Yes”.
2. **Was the Love Reality Tour helpful in understanding your identity as a child of God?** 99.6% answered “Yes”.
3. **Was this the first time you had heard the gospel presented in a way that gave you confidence in your standing with the Father?** 75% answered “Yes”.
4. **Would you like to see more of this style of programming at you church?** 98.5 % answered “Yes”.
5. **Would you feel comfortable bringing your non-Adventist friends to LRT?** 95% answered “Yes”.

Points Worth Noting

The answers to the above questions are very revealing in terms of where our church stands as a whole. Based on the survey and follow-up talks with attendees and staff:

- People want to have a biblical message that feeds them spiritually. While facts are nice, they want to be led into a closer relationship with God.
- Our church has an identity crisis and most people don't know who they are as Christians. It is hard to invite someone else into something you are not firmly grounded in yourself.
- Most people are afraid of and are not confident in how they stand with God. Salvation is one of the most basic elements to the Christian faith and a good number of church members lack confidence when it comes their personal salvation.
- Style is a package deal; it's not just one aspect. During the LRT series, everything matched from the moment you were invited with a personal invitation card to the conclusion of the series. Graphics, decorations, music, and message all went together along with everyone who helped.

In relation to this last point, theologian Lesslie Newbigin makes the following claim: “[The Christian message] can fail by failing to understand and take seriously the world in which it is set. The gospel is not heard but remains incomprehensible because the Church has sought security in its own past instead of risking its life in the deep involvement with the world” (12).

The church is at risk by allowing a small percentage of its attendees to stop it from moving forward in implementing a “package” that is contemporary with the time in which it serves. Many times the blame is placed on the older generation, however 100% of those over the age of 50 said they would like to see more of “this style” of programming in their church. If the church does not adapt its presentation style to its surroundings, it could prevent itself from keeping and evangelizing to youth and young adults both in and out of the church. Jon Paulien validates this point when he writes: “If a local church is comfortable only with the ways they have done things in the past, secular Postmoderns will not stay long. If you are part of such a church, serious outreach to secular people will likely fail in the long run” (72). Not only did LRT’s attendees enjoy the evangelistic series, but 95% felt comfortable enough to invite their friends

to a future series. This is exciting, as most people can be hesitant or afraid to invite their friends to church.

Conclusion

When we look at the summer camp model of evangelism, we see that it is successful both in the camp environment and also in youth and young adult evangelism outside of summer programming. Perhaps what's even more exciting is that the summer-camp model of evangelism is successful in reaching all age demographics. While the meetings primarily targeted those under the age of 35, many people from various age groups attended and were extremely blessed. In other words, the summer camp model of evangelism is effective for all ages!

In essence, if the church were to invest in the summer camp model of evangelism—making sure to include excellent and intentional programming, provide authentic community and practical life applicability—many currently inactive young adults would most probably decide to get involved and lead the way.

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Definitions

Secular: "A secular person is someone who lives from day to day with little or no reference to God or the practices of formal religion" (Paulien, 27).

Postmodern: "In many ways, today's younger generations, often called "post-moderns," are the polar opposites of traditional secular people. Where traditional secular people live life without significant reference to God, post-modern secular people tend to be very spiritual" (Paulien, 32).

Endnotes

1 Jon. Paulien, *Everlasting Gospel, Ever-Changing World: Introducing Jesus to a Skeptical Generation*. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing, 2008), 24.

2 Ibid.

3 Camp Waianae is a Seventh-day Adventist camp in Hawaii.